

FIRE WATCH  
Jeff Hutcheson  
ACCIDENTAL FIRES



Within the last two weeks the Council Bluffs Fire Department has responded to two fairly large structure fires which turned out to be accidental in nature. One was a business and one was a single-family home. In both cases, the buildings were left unusable.

The first fire was at a local restaurant. When fire crews arrived, there was heavy smoke showing from the building. Once they were able to get inside, they discovered substantial smoke and fire damage throughout the building. The fire had extended into the ceiling and was able to travel throughout the building. Our investigation showed that this fire, which left a local business owner without a business, was the result of an ashtray being dumped into a trash can. The cigarette butts smoldered undetected and eventually ignited the contents of the trash can and adjacent walls. We cannot over-emphasize the importance of making sure that there are no hot ashes or embers in ashtrays or fireplace or wood-stove ashes. Please, just let these items cool until the next morning and then place them in a non-combustible container.

The second fire was in a single- family house. This fire was the result of leaving an unattended cooking pan on the stove. In this case, the resident put a pan of oil on the burner to cook french fries. She then left the kitchen to take care of some other household chores. When she returned to the kitchen, the pan of oil and the kitchen curtains were on fire. At this point, rather than immediately getting out of the house and calling 9-1-1, she attempted to extinguish the fire with the spray hose on the kitchen sink. The water spread the fire to the rest of the kitchen. The result was significant fire damage to the entire home.

There are several lessons to be learned from this fire. First, do not leave cooking unattended. Time has a way of slipping away and what you think may be only a few minutes can quickly turn into an extended period of time. Secondly, it is a good idea to keep a lid which fits the pan close by. In the event there is a pan fire, it is a simple matter to just place the lid on the flaming pan, turn off the burner and LET IT COOL. I guarantee the fire will go out. Do not use water, flour, sugar or other material to extinguish the fire. Baking soda is okay to use. Better would be a small ABC-rated fire extinguisher. Best is to prevent the fire in the first place by being aware and observant. Third, IMMEDIATELY upon seeing a fire, call 9-1-1. The quicker you call, the faster we get there and the smaller the resulting fire. Even if the fire appears to be out, call us so we can be sure it is out completely and that it hasn't extended into the wall or ceiling. Cooking fires are the #1 cause of home fires and home fire injuries. Most cooking equipment fires start with the ignition of common household items (e.g., food or grease, cabinets, wall coverings, paper or plastic bags, curtains, etc.). In 1999, there were 96,200 home structure fires associated with cooking equipment, resulting in 331 deaths, 4,183 injuries and \$511.3 million in direct property damage. Unattended cooking is the leading cause of home cooking fires.

Three in every 10 reported home fires start in the kitchen, more than any other place in the home.

The National Fire Protection Association offers these additional cooking tips:

Always use cooking equipment tested and approved by a recognized testing facility.

Never leave cooking food on the stove top unattended, and keep a close eye on food cooking inside the oven.

Keep cooking areas clean and clear of combustibles (e.g. potholders, towels, rags, drapes and food packaging).

Keep children and pets away from cooking areas by creating a three-foot "kid-free zone" around the stove.

Turn pot handles inward so they can't be bumped and children can't grab them.

Wear short, close fitting or tightly rolled sleeves when cooking. Loose clothing can dangle onto stove burners and catch fire.

Never use a wet oven mitt, as it presents a scald danger if the moisture in the mitt is heated.

If there is an oven fire, turn off the heat and keep the door closed to prevent flames from burning you and your clothing.

If there is a microwave fire, keep the door closed and unplug the microwave. Call the fire department and make sure to have the oven serviced before you use it again. Food cooked in a microwave can be dangerously hot. Remove the lids or other coverings from microwaved food carefully to prevent steam burns.

Remember, most fires can be prevented by using a little common sense and good housekeeping practices.

## FIRE HYDRANTS

We would like to extend a big thank you to everyone who took the time and energy to dig out fire hydrants near their homes or businesses. Just a note though, it is more important to dig the hydrant out from the street rather than from the driveway or sidewalk. We most often connect to the hydrant from the street side so that is where we need access.

As always, I appreciate your comments, questions and criticisms. I can be reached at; Council Bluffs Fire Department, 200 South 4th Street, Council Bluffs, Iowa 51503, 712-328-4671 or via e-mail at [jhutcheson@cbfire.org](mailto:jhutcheson@cbfire.org).